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Testimony of Sarah Chasse, BSW, MSW Student
Select Committee on Children Public Hearing
S.B. 877, S.B. 879, H.B. 6411
Thursday, February 19, 2009

Good Morning. My name is Sarah Chasse, and I am an MSW Student and Intern at the Connecticut Chapter of The National Association of Social Workers. I am testifying in regards to Senate Bills 877 and 879, and House Bill 6411. All three bill concepts; reducing child poverty, establishing a task force to study DCF, and implementing the recommendations of the Program Review and Investigations Committee concerning DCF, center around the issue of prevention.

While working for a private child welfare agency, I witnessed the growing need for a prevention based system. As a direct service worker, I saw numerous children, youth, and families who could have exited the system much sooner, and with better outcomes, had preventative services been in place to meet their basic needs and stop the cycle of poverty. It was this experience in the social work field which drove me to pursue my MSW in Policy Practice, as I saw a need and great potential for change on a policy level. The bills before you today hold this potential, and are the very essence of the change in focus that the child welfare system so desperately needs; reactive to preventative.

S.B. 877 speaks to the need for DCF to implement recommendations for comprehensive service delivery, mainly concerning prevention. At present, DCF has the difficult task of balancing the needs of many at-risk children and families with limited staff and funding, resulting in large case loads, and leading to a reactive nature of service delivery. In order to adequately meet the needs of the child welfare population, there is a need for preventative policies, programs, and services to restore balance to this currently crisis oriented system. Establishing a State Advisory Council to monitor the implementation of prevention based services would create a level of oversight necessary for such an initiative.

S.B. 879 also addresses prevention, as it seeks to establish a task force to study DCF policy, practice, and procedure, as well as to consider changes in DCF structure or possible transfer of key functions to other agencies. It is necessary to establish such a task force in the interest of examining current DCF operations for several reasons. Not only is there a need for oversight to ensure a high quality of service delivery, but also to explore options and realities of a re-structuring plan against past attempts to re-organize DCF for purposes of increased efficiency and improved outcomes. Should such a task force be established, it will be important to ensure a balanced representation of child welfare policy and practice experts, as outlined in S.B. 877 for the State Advisory Council.

H.B. 6411 address the pressing issue of child poverty, and the need to meet basic needs of children and families in order to reduce child poverty in the present, and invest in preventative efforts for the future. By increasing access to safety net services, identifying cost saving measures to prevent homelessness and increase housing stability, the proposed measure to establish an emergency response system will be the first step towards truly reducing child poverty in the state. In addition, maximizing federal funds and identifying long-term cost savings for prevention services will then move the state towards a minimum of ten percent total agency budgets directed towards prevention.

All three bills focus on the need for prevention in child welfare, and all three provide key steps to meeting the needs of vulnerable, at-risk populations within the state. With a current level of only one percent of DCF's total FY09 budget allocated to prevention, these steps have the potential for considerable improvement to the structure and delivery of current child welfare services.